

Popular Culture, Violence and Capital in 1980s Colombian Cinema¹

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Introduction

In the 1980s the Colombian state attempted to build a national cinema industry by offering credits to filmmakers via the state-funded Compañía de Fomento Cinematográfico (FOCINE, founded in 1978).² Given the inevitable compromises that those hoping to gain FOCINE funding and distribution contracts had to make with hegemonic political, formal and industrial models, filmmakers on the radical left tended to reject the state funding structure, since they felt it amounted to ideological submission that could lead only to self-censorship.³ Yet through close analyses of three FOCINE productions, this article argues that some of those films sought to make political statements through either conventionally used or reconverted cinematic forms, with their directors standing not as idealized models of artistic or ideological purity, but rather as media workers akin to Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, staking out critical discourses within the Colombian cinematic field (Bourdieu, *The Field*). It examines the articulation of violence in *Pisingaña* (Dir. Leopoldo Pinzón, 1986), *Pura sangre* (Dir. Luis Ospina, 1982) and *Rodrigo D. No futuro* (Dir. Víctor Gaviria, 1990),⁴ showing how they explore and engage with the historic and ongoing role of violence in shaping the political, economic and cultural spheres of Colombian society. Drawing on Jesús Martín-Barbero's notion of "secondary orality" as "the space of osmosis [...] between archaic narratives and postmodern technological

devices" (*Mediaciones* 15),⁵ I explore how violence both defines and constitutes cultural narratives, and how it mediates between popular expression and globalized capital.

For Martín-Barbero, the Colombian state was founded on systemic ethnic and gender exclusion: a "structural violence" that prevented the formulation of a common national narrative and treated everyday violence as a distant, barbaric leftover of a pre-modern age: a "subhistory...of factions moved by irreconcilable interests" ("Colombia," section 1). *Pisingaña* confronts this historiographical brutality, placing the "subhistory" of Graciela, a refugee from the rural violence, in the heart of the metropolis.⁶ I argue that in its unconventional treatment of narrative point-of-view and its oneiric re-enactments of rural violence, *Pisingaña* posits Graciela as a latent threat to the apparent sexual, racial and psychological wholeness of the urban bourgeoisie, whose political and cultural values rest on the very "structural violence" they disavow. In Homi Bhabha's terms (drawing on Walter Benjamin, Benedict Anderson and Jacques Derrida), Graciela is "supplementary" to normative historical discourse, her presence disturbs the "fixed and stable forms of the nationalist narrative" built upon horizontal, homogeneous empty time: "insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse, the supplementary antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidity" (305-06). The character of Graciela thus questions the seamless glide of present trauma into historical narrative.

If violence in *Pisingaña* serves to buttress elite power and knowledge structures, in *Pura sangre* knowledge itself is exposed as the result of a putrid alliance between capital and mass culture. In this political vampire thriller, a dying *caleño* tycoon has young men murdered to provide him with a constant supply of fresh blood, while folk rumour ascribes blame for these crimes to the mythical “monstruo de los mangones.” In my analysis of this film, I discuss how the popular is seen not as an innocent or subversive presence but as a co-optable conduit for “secondary orality:” a social logic “grammaticized not by the syntax of the book [...] but by the audiovisual syntax that began with cinema and continued with television” (Martín-Barbero, *Mediaciones* 15). By contrasting the cold, businesslike rationality of the real “monster” with the inhuman stare of the madman the media scapegoats for the crime, I argue, Ospina’s film shows the eponymous blood dripping from the hands of capitalism as it substitutes truth and reality for a corrupt and consumable hyperreality.⁷ In *Rodrigo D.*, on the other hand, the “third violence” referred to above is neither disavowed nor revealed lurking beneath the surface of capitalism; it is unrelenting, immediate, the very fabric of the identity of Rodrigo, a nihilistic teenager from a Medellín shanty-town. Yet by articulating the aimless time of Rodrigo’s “subhistory,” Gaviria’s camera seeks to replace depthless sensationalism with humanity. I show how popular voices emerge from the surface of the films that portray them, and how violence is variously posed as repressing, co-opting or constituting them. Violence, ultimately, does not so much threaten Colombian society from the outside as narrate it from within.

***Pisingaña*: Un-narrating History**

In *Pisingaña*’s opening sequence, the montage of sound and image sets up a structural divide between urban rationality and violent, unfathomable rural barbarity. A long shot of the tropical countryside accompanies discordant music on the

soundtrack; gunshots are heard before a close-up shows a bird being shot dead. A point-of-view shot follows the boots of an unseen man walking through the wilderness; every few seconds the frame freezes. The music ends abruptly as we cut to a middle-aged middle-class couple lying in bed. We hear only the everyday sounds of the wife’s snoring and the ringing of the alarm clock. A cut back to the violence-ridden countryside is accompanied by the jarring music once more.

Pisingaña tells the story of Graciela, a fifteen-year-old *campesina* whose father was murdered in a cold-blooded act of rural violence, before she herself was raped by the uniformed murderers. Jorge, a dissatisfied and ineffectual bureaucrat, employs her as a maid in his affluent Bogotá family home. Empowered by his role of savior and infatuated with his exotic protégée, Jorge seduces Graciela, who acts as both a source of relief from his sterile sex life with his wife Helena, and an outlet for his repressed masculine power-fantasy. When Helena catches them making love, the girl is forced to leave so that the stunted and repressive family unit can maintain its veneer of respectability. Two years later the couple read in the newspaper that the girl, now seventeen with a newly born daughter, has committed suicide.

Graciela, whose irruption into Jorge’s home defines the film’s temporal span, is silent, passive, infantilized, barely able even to speak Spanish. The film’s narrative structure and visual style construct her as unfathomable, compelling the viewer to identify with her hosts. Her rural/indigenous presence, both in the city and within the filmic narrative, appears as a violent suspension of normality that intrudes into and disturbs the urban status quo, only momentarily shaken by the news of her death. Graciela’s urban hosts are well aware that the “second violence” that propelled Graciela’s evacuation from the countryside is an integral part of Colombian history—Jorge’s mother, for instance, laments that she has never known anything but war. Yet when brutality breaks through the comfortable surface of bourgeois city-life it is presented not

as a troublesome and comprehended part of a collective history but as something aberrant and alien, sad but accepted, a story for trivial arguments in the bar or an object of disavowal. According to Helena, “ahora se vive en paz en este país, gracias a Dios” [Nowadays this country is at peace, thank God].

Yet the *narration* of rural violence is an overwhelmingly urban affair. Graciela’s rape is first conveyed to the viewer through flashback, a device that conventionally serves to reveal crucial information and lend psychological depth to a character’s past. The rape, however, seems to say more about the family than about Graciela herself. As Jorge and his family are conversing over dinner, the peasant girl’s silence as she is serving at the table is patronizingly commented on as if she were absent: “Parece boba pero no lo es” [She may seem stupid, but she’s not]. Jorge’s son makes a naïve comment on the peaceful life of the countryside, leading into the flashback sequence. The verbally atrophied Graciela is evidently not narrating her own story to the family to offset their ignorance: it is left to an omniscient narrator to tell her part of the story “directly” to the viewer. The episode serves less to deepen the spectator’s psychological knowledge of “Fulanita” [Little what’s-her-name] herself (as Helena addresses her) or to create an empathetic link between viewer and protagonist than to condemn the hypocrisy and small-mindedness of her middle-class hosts.

The film as a whole is constructed as a satirical critique of its urban protagonists’ lack of understanding of the likes of Graciela, or of their own psycho-social responsibility for the violence that tears their country apart. In his free time Jorge joins his office colleagues in their “club de observadores de mujeres” [women-spotting club], cruising through Bogotá’s streets admiring young ladies. When he narrates Graciela’s rape to them they react with a throwaway “¡Qué hijueputas!” [Bastards!], before “reminiscing” about their own grandfathers’ heroic (and macho) exploits in the turn-of-the-century civil wars. This incident exemplifies the rigid framework

of sexual power established throughout the film. When Jorge’s secretary Meme dies after being continually beaten by her husband, her husband tells Jorge afterwards, “Unas patadas con cariño no pueden faltar en ningún matrimonio [...] Soy un pilar de la sociedad” [There are always a few loving taps (literally, “kicks”) in any marriage (...) I’m a pillar of society]. The narration of Meme’s death is marked by montage inserts of Graciela’s rape: this fragmentary association of the two events calls on the viewer to note the evident misogyny underlying almost all of the relationships between men and women in the film, and the poignant contrast between the passive indignation towards sexual violence in the countryside and its socialized equivalent in bourgeois society. The protagonists seem unaware that the very same sexual politics that lead to the rape of a fifteen-year-old girl in the countryside inform their own metropolitan attitude toward women.

A teleological view of history conceives of a well-informed and culturally-superior present as the fortuitous outcome of a maybe painful but justifiable chain of events: the men’s grandfathers fought so that they could live comfortable lives in the metropolis; violence is distant and alien. *Pisingaña*’s historical aesthetic reveals the hypocrisy and repressiveness of this spatio-temporal linearity, since violence is a constituent part of middle-class comfort: the physical reality of the countryside is the psychic reality of the city, where victims of the rural trauma are converted into sources of financial and sexual capital. By narrating the traumatic past and by including the “irrational Other” of the countryside in their conversation, Jorge and his friends believe that they have internalized national violence into their superior knowledge systems. Writing on the creation of collective memory in Colombian cinema, Ilene Goldman quotes Michel de Certeau’s discussion of the differentiation between a “now” and a “then” that historical discourse lays the groundwork for, proposing that it “makes a social identity explicit, not so much in the way it is ‘given’ or held as stable,

as in the ways it is differentiated from a former period or another society. It presupposes the rupture that changes a tradition into a past object" (62). In the film, social identity is exclusionary, male and bourgeois; it takes shape by differentiating itself firstly from the nineteenth-century wars and La Violencia, or the "first Violence" (former periods), and secondly from the contemporary, rural "second Violence" (effectively, another society), even as it recognizes that violence is still rife in Colombia. If in de Certeau's example the rupture serves to delimit historical events, for Jorge and his friends it supplies an illusory temporal and spatial distance-effect. The men are able to make conceptual leaps between Graciela's plight in rural Colombia, the historicized wars of their grandfathers and their own comfortable existence in central and suburban Bogotá without admitting to any linkage or continuity between the three.

A similar point can be made for the representation of Graciela on a racial level. For Jesús Martín-Barbero, "ethnic groups [are] integrated into the very structure of capitalism, yet at the same time they produce a cultural truth not exhausted by capitalism" ("Identidad" 94). The nation's modernity is bound up with ethnocentricity: indigenous communities are not allowed a place on the historical continuum; they are ahistoricized, cast as embodying a folkloric past within the present, and subsumed into a homogenizing national discourse. Yet it is precisely this present, the urban "norm" that Jorge and his companions inhabit, that moments of *Pisingaña* seek to demystify, hinting that its conceptualization of time, history and truth are not the absolute values to which they lay claim. As Martín-Barbero argues, indigenous identity is inscribed within the cultural text of capitalism: an identity that dominant culture attempts to cancel out by claiming it as national patrimony, but which has the potential to bring itself to visibility. Describing the formation of national consciousness, Homi Bhabha juxtaposes "performative" and "pedagogical" histories to deflate the idea of nation or language/meaning-as-

totality: communal imaginaries in modern nations are not horizontal or self-enclosed but metaphorical. Within the space of this "metaphoricity" (Bhabha 293) emerges a de-centered temporality: the ongoing performance of history that falls outside the boundaries of tradition/nation - in *Pisingaña*, the ousted and unwritten presence of Graciela, the "pequeña heroína" [little heroine] whose death is not even recorded in the official list of victims of the rural violence. Hence the unsettling effect that the presence of the indigenous has on officially conceived historical time: since the bourgeois communalities formed around denial are exposed as identifying metaphors which reject, exoticize and commodify a multiplicity of discourses, the cultural and narrative "third dimension" (Graciela) is made visible only by recourse to what Bhabha defines as a field of meaning beyond the grasp of the authoritative subject. In *Pisingaña* this "third dimension" is presented not as knowledge but rather as the unknowable - in order to grasp Colombian history, or even the story narrated in the film, the viewer knows s/he must access Graciela's psyche. But as we have seen, Graciela's past, her desires and motivations, are inaccessible, for history and narration are available only from the perspective of the metropolitan elite. *Pisingaña* hints at the ambivalence of authoritative history but fails to locate itself within a representational third dimension that would allow us to access the "other" story/history of Graciela.

At certain moments, though, cracks appear in the film's tightly wrought dramatic structure, allowing Graciela's silence to appear more as a result of cultural objectification than as an essential quality. In an interview entitled "*Pisingaña*, violenta como la realidad," Pinzón describes the sex between Jorge and Graciela as a utopian moment in which "they both escape from the horror of their lives," but remarks that "the hope that he might choose a new life with Graciela is absurd and chimerical." Rather than reading it as a straight seduction (consumption) by Jorge, Pinzón sees it as a unifying process whereby white and indigenous, urban and rural, pedagogical and

performative histories are not held in tension but momentarily penetrate each other's surfaces, no longer standing as dominant and subaltern but each one culturally informed by the difference of the other. We might cast doubt on this reading by reference to Jorge's callous boast to his friends of his plans to seduce the "sirvientita" [little servant], but *Pisingaña* does stress nonetheless that Jorge's bourgeois conventionality is a moral and psychological charade, a fact of which he is fully aware: we believe Graciela when she tells her "lover" that she feels sorry for him, for at least she can leave him. Just as Graciela's psychological discourse is "censored" by traditional historiography, the strictures of conventional morality censor Jorge and Helena's own repressed sexual realities.

It is by bringing to the fore the realm of the oneiric and the unconscious that the silenced voices of the national unconscious can be seen to emerge. This is enabled by the introduction of the alternative temporality of dream into conventional historical time, displaying transgressive networks of meaning within dominant discourse that relativize (metaphorize) it and sow the seeds of alterity. Returning to the scene of Graciela's rape, this decisive moment is relayed by means of flashback and dream. As we have pointed out, flashback here signals only distance and silencing. But Graciela's more immediate, fragmented and abstracted rape dream towards the end of the film provides one of the few moments in the film that the viewer comes close to a psychological identification with the protagonist. Here the horror is not simply historicized as past action, as in the case of the other, more conventional narratives, but it is transposed to the apparent comfort of her new urban surroundings. The soldiers assault her not in the countryside but in her bed in Bogotá, violence is not Other and distant but rather forms a very real part of Graciela's "now."

Dream functions in a different way for Jorge and Helena, but has a similar effect of temporal and psychological dislocation. The first conversation we hear in Jorge's home concerns Helena's dream in which she

is being eaten by flies and she is in a room with a broken staircase, "cortadas en la mitad como después de un terremoto" [sliced in two, as if there had just been an earthquake]. Her doctor later analyses this to be an unconscious escape of frustrated sexual desire. Jorge's daydream sequence comes near the end of the film, semi-framing the entire narrative around sublimated desire, as he appears in a church after Graciela's death, paying to have a service delivered in her honor every day until the year 2000. When the guard of propriety is down, the temporal/sexual time of dream breaks through a holistic notion of social belonging, as both Jorge and Helena clamor at the bars of their conventional existence, banging on the gates of modes of being that are beyond both their and the spectator's reach.

Thus by "othering" violence, indigeneity and sexual desire, in censoring them into exclusion and difference, dominant society discovers not only that Graciela manages to inscribe herself into the text of capitalist development without being consumed by it (her "cultural truth not exhausted by capitalism"), but also that her irruption into the scene triggers in both the characters and in the viewer a *need* for her presence not simply as an exotic counterpoint to Jorge and his family but as a hidden, unwritten source of humanity. In Bhabha's terms, Graciela exemplifies supplementarity by upsetting the structure of the dominant and signalling minuses in its social text, raising the potential for a "renegotiation of those times, terms, and traditions through which we turn our uncertain, passing contemporaneity into the signs of history" (306). Otherness, far from providing Jorge with a fulfilling mirror, tantalizes him with an unattainable alternative mode of being, something he (like his society) is unable to rationalize within pedagogical history, something that creates a desire for possession but which cannot be grasped, owing partly to the rigidity of the social structures that spit it out. In *Pisingaña* the authority of both the verbal and the visual languages used to recount history is undermined as they obscure only an illusory national content;

when the viewer “experiences” Graciela’s rape s/he is lulled into a deceptive sense that s/he “knows” what happened - that s/he understands history. The rationalist, linear knowledge systems that uphold mainstream society’s ability to dominate its unseen, “backward” elements are riddled with fault lines. It is only through violence (be it physical or psychic) that they can be maintained.

Pura sangre: Masking Genres

If in *Pisingaña* the popular (represented by Graciela) is violently cast into submission and allowed a voice only through cracks in the dominant narrative, it forms the entire narrative premise of Luis Ospina’s reconverted horror-thriller genre film *Pura sangre*. Pinzón’s Bogotá is a world of hypocrisy, greed and repression, but it is also a safe, rooted urban stereotype: humdrum office, the bustle of the Calle Séptima, a suburban household defined by “high” culture. Traditional social hierarchies are upheld: the popular as purity, simplicity and authenticity versus the city as sophistication and, for Pinzón, pretense. The civic imaginary of *Pura sangre*, on the other hand, seems to respond not to such historical or psycho-sexual certainties, but to a deterritorialized “secondary orality.” The focal-point of collective identity is the audiovisual regime, part of a reconfigured way of remembering described by Gianni Vattimo as the “development of information and global communication as *image*,”⁸ giving primacy not to essential truths but to semblances of truths. In *Pura sangre*, popular memory is mediated by audiovisual technologies; traditional knowledge systems fuse into a postmodern flux of hyper-information. Knowledge is filtered through money and power, and investigation (as the search for knowledge) is converted into a popular spectacle that replaces essential truth for a power-laden imagistic fantasy.

Pura sangre tells of the son of a dying *caleño* sugar tycoon who, having been told that his father must have regular infusions of young male blood in order to stay alive,

blackmails a young nurse and her two male auxiliaries into cruising the streets of Cali, abducting and murdering their victims to pass the blood onto the fast-decaying Don Roberto. The script was inspired by a legend that appeared in the 1970s after a series of naked young male corpses were found, raped and emptied of blood, on patches of wasteland around the city: according to popular myth the crimes were committed by the “monstruo de los mangones,” a vampiric creature acting under the control of a business magnate (Pérez López, “Caliwood”). As Don Roberto’s mercenaries murder their victims, their deaths are conveyed to the public via TV news reports that blend commercial journalistic sensationalism with popular belief and common prejudice. To read the film through Martín-Barbero, *Pura sangre* reflects the changing nature of truth-values in a society that has failed to undergo a comprehensive rationalist cultural upheaval based on universal literacy: “secondary orality constitutes [...] the space of osmosis between memories [...] of lived experience and narration, and new audiovisual narrative devices, between archaic narratives and postmodern technological devices (*Mediaciones* 15). In navigating the waters between archaic forms of remembrance and postmodern audiovisual histories, the movie unleashes a tension between different types of narratives and truth-systems: the linear logic of the film narrative and the logic of visuality.

In “The Terror of Pleasure,” an essay on the influence of postmodern theory on the workings of the horror genre, Tania Modleski outlines its subversive power, posing that by preventing narcissistic identification with unsympathetic or shallow characters and by dismembering the wholeness of body, family and narrative closure, horror produces in the viewer what Jean Baudrillard defines as a perverse glee in witnessing the destruction of the “specious good”—everything that is sacred to bourgeois conventionality. In doing so, she argues that beyond Barthes’s “jouissance” / pleasure opposition, the mass culture of horror transcends the common

association of postmodernism with pleasure (the consumerist necessity to satisfy and to confirm conventional beliefs), opening up a leeway within which we can read *Pura sangre's* postmodern dialogue (osmosis) between audiovisual and traditional oral epistemologies as an anti-hegemonic device. The duality of Ospina's film revolves around an opposition between logic and illogic in a way that unhinges the traditional horror strategy of narrative chaos. Horror plots are conventionally driven by illogic as the "monster," often itself the product of bourgeois or consumerist society, wreaks havoc on the established order and denies the conventional desire for continuity and closure—both to allow for the possibility of endless sequels and to gleefully thwart the audience's expectations (Modleski 289). *Pura sangre's* diegesis, on the other hand, is driven by a strong sense of logic, as the storyline itself follows a fairly conventional (non-horror) path, from the pre-credit establishing scene of a dead body on the doctors' kitchen floor setting up the blackmail right through to the resolution that scapegoats a black madman, Babalú, for the crimes. From the moment that Don Roberto's son Adolfo gives the instructions to the "mangones" team we are rarely in doubt as to the rational motives of the "monster."

Much of the movie's impact lies in the cold rationalism underlying the camera's attitude to the actions of the gang who, interested only in keeping their own murders anonymous, kidnap children and coked-up teenagers in nightclubs for their blood. Narrative logic, continuity and closure are keys not to identification and wholeness but to a putrid alliance between rationality and power; the dénouement metes out a corrupt "justice" whereby a year after his death Don Roberto is worshipped by the crying masses as his memorial is converted into an icon of popular salvation. Yet if we look beyond the almost linear narrative of the plot itself we see a less tangible sense of logic composed around images, to which we are given a clue when Don Roberto is lying in his sickbed watching Hollywood movies on video. As

the opening credits of *Citizen Kane* roll he demands that the nurse put on a different film, and in the few seconds it takes her to put on the new movie the screen switches to the TV news, showing the image of a dead body, maybe one of the "mangones" victims. Fernando Ramírez Lamus reads the "aged vampire" here as analogous to the cinema viewer, since "as well as giving him transfusions of young blood and massages, the nurse applies another type of transfusions and massages: films on Betamax" (17)—like the blood, the video tapes are inserted into his passive viewing consciousness. He becomes a consumer of images, opening up his wasting body that has become a metaphorical video player to view, process and spit out snippets of decontextualized images and information, only to forget them again as soon as the next set of images (the next film) has replaced them.

This mode of viewing hints at the logic of the image throughout the film's text, as three-dimensional physicality is frequently converted into two-dimensional images exchanged for money or power. When Don Roberto spies on his nurse changing into her uniform via the grainy black-and-white images of the CCTV camera, she asks him over the intercom what he wishes her to put on: she sells not her body but a vision of her body to the powerful "vampire," who plays out sexual desire mediated through the screen. As in pornography, it does not matter that the desired object is inaccessible in reality. What matters is visual impact, a quantity easily reducible to Modleski's postmodern consumerism—the same aesthetics of the surface that informs the mass-media hysteria as the scapegoat Babalú is led off at the film's end by the police, filmed live by the TV cameras, while a newspaper headline screams: "¡Cayó el monstruo!" [The monster succumbs!]. The TV news reporter had earlier posed the "diferentes versiones que la imaginación popular está tejiendo en torno a Mangones y su banda" [various tales that the popular imagination is weaving about Mangones and his gang], including the theories of an "homosexual degenerado" [degenerate

homosexual] and a “vampiro como Drácula” [Dracula-like vampire], signalling a mutual transfusion of value between the “archaic narratives” of folkloric belief-systems and the “postmodern technological devices” of the news program in a clear echo of Martín-Barbero’s secondary orality. The hybrid enunciator of the popular imagination rewires conventional investigation, completing the separation of historical continuity and knowledge.

Such cultural osmosis is interpreted by Martín-Barbero as a potentially liberating experience, enabling newly forming non-territorial communities to bypass the hierarchical assumptions that plague the traditional social imaginary. In *Pura sangre*, however, the effect is to level out popular beliefs, conventional prejudice and fragments of filmed reality in an illusory act of *bricolage* that enables the audiovisual media to patch together its own “truth” driven by sensationalism, the need to captivate the viewer by the power of the image. Among the film’s most striking episodes is precisely the scene in which Babalú is being interviewed on the news against the blank background of a police mug-shot, maniacally uttering fabricated confessions, his eyes staring and juddering. The immobile camera begins with a centred shot of his face, hiding its own presence and giving the effect of direct transmission; as the confession intensifies it zooms almost imperceptibly to an extreme close-up on his face. Every abnormality is exaggerated, every detail that suggests that he does not quite belong to “our” society.

So by reconfiguring and deterritorializing knowledge, television here makes a highly repressive gesture towards popular culture, using its epistemologies to legitimate its own commercial agenda—by signifying this “social outcast” as the “monstruo de los mangones,” audiovisual culture imposes a logic accessible to the masses which at once pushes abnormality beyond the boundaries of the socialized or the acceptable and enables it to market its version of the truth. The effect, of course, is to provide a scapegoat for Don Roberto’s massa-

cre crew and to conceal the real involvement of power in repression. But it would be inaccurate to say that TV is in league with hierarchies of power, as may be true in a totalitarian society: it is rather that it is completely indifferent as to whether there is any bond at all between the index to reality it claims to constitute and tangible historical fact. In *Pura sangre* the audiovisual media within the diegesis are far from an unproblematic conveyor of popular consciousness, for by conflating historical time and communal space into a saleable series of iconic moments, they allow themselves to recreate popular memory, assigning to their story/history an easily accepted ‘truth-value’ while circumventing the need to reference its story in an originary reality. Outside the narrative, the film itself engages in a critical dialogue with these constructed “truths.”

In *Pura sangre* knowledge, like one of the bodies cast onto the rubbish heap by Don Roberto’s mercenaries, is cast out from geographical space to material decomposition; sign and referent fuse into one illusory structure. Reality collapses into fleeting illusory fragments of half-truths, and historical or journalistic truth becomes part of a commercialized pastiche of images. Can we, then, configure a new definition of knowledge in a postmodern age? Can we satisfy what Martín-Barbero identifies as one of the most salient needs of a mediatised society “whose sense of temporality is violently shaken by the informational revolution:” “the need for a temporal anchor” (“El futuro,” section 1)? Ospina’s film seizes what is not integrated into cultural modernization to show that rather than being “a destiempo” (out of step), popular culture is an integral part of modernity. But what of those who, like the protagonists of Víctor Gaviria’s film *Rodrigo D. No futuro* in Medellín’s slums, have been abandoned by modernity, the censored invisible bodies who do not even figure on the audiovisual map? Does this necessarily lead to obliteration or can they, like the disappeared of the Southern Cone dictatorship, be rescued by a “new notion of time [...] that activates the past, that allows us to unfold those times that are tied

down and throttled by official memory"? (Martín-Barbero, "El futuro," section 1).

Rodrigo D.: The Agency of the Invisible

Víctor Gaviria has been accused of *pornomiseria*: an amalgamation of the atemporal voyeurism of pornography and the representation of poverty (*miseria*) in the mass media.⁹ Not only does pornography dislocate the social interaction of human sexuality into an experience mediated by a screen, but it favors visuality over materiality, the immediacy of the image over narrative depth. Truth-value is irrelevant, the spectator revels in a display of virtual sex whose specular presence supplants the real physical satisfaction of sexual desire. *Pornomiseria* thus catapults social erotica beyond an opposition between reality and fiction into a mediatized space saturated by images of violence and poverty. A quasi-apocalyptic "out-there" is negotiated by the postmodern consumer only as a series of signs, never to be experienced in the flesh, serving to feed the viewers' lust for the sensational while reassuring them of the security of their own viewing positions, protected from the action by the screen.

Such conversion of violence into a system of virtual spectacles reminds us of a Baudrillardian simulacrum, "never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (Baudrillard 173): a nexus of empty and interchanging images that respond not to reality but to a "hyperreality" in which "the relation of word, image or meaning and referent is broken and restructured so that its force is directed, not to the referent of use value or utility, but to desire" (Poster 1-2). *Pornomiseria's* social function somewhat resembles Baudrillard's "operational negativity" (179), whereby society attempts to convince itself of its own reality by juxtaposing it with what it claims to be undeniably unreal. The "magic" of Disneyland proves that the rest of America is

"real," the "scandal" of Watergate proves that the rest of politics is honest. The "horror" of the TV image of violence, we might add, confirms the relative "safety" of real life. Baudrillard argues that such oppositional categories are untenable—"[i]llusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" (180).

But the context of the Colombian city introduces a fracture into the cocoon-like framework of the hyperreal: the real geographical divide that physically separates bourgeois normality from the peripheral mediated reality of those who live the *miseria* that is specularized and sensationalized by the television image. In *Rodrigo D. No futuro* (1990), Víctor Gaviria attempts to rescue those who live in the *comunas* of Medellín, the underside of the city's modernity, by leading them outside their audiovisual prison of non-identity. He seeks to re-establish the physicality and humanity they are deprived of by the *pornomiserógrafos* who empty out their existences into depthless images, by a "social text that refuses to interpellate them as meaningful subjects" driven by "spatially drawn lines of power that ghettoize and curtail their existence" (Kantaris, "Allegorical", section 3). Gaviria comments that in much contemporary cinema "the inspiration doesn't come from life itself but from other films, and it lacks [...] that special way of making you feel that you're there" (Gaviria, "Víctor Gaviria," paragraph 10). His aesthetic undermines a sterile normality constructed around decentered transnational identificatory regimes and non-places, choosing instead to find poetry in those whom this exclusionary hypermodernity leaves behind. An establishing shot in Gaviria's later film *La vendedora de rosas* (1998) follows the brand new Medellín metro charging through the city at high speed along a strand of the communicational/informational web; after focusing briefly on the train the camera pans across to rest on the protagonist Mónica and her friend Andrea. To reverse the camera's perspective would give us a clue as to the fragmentary experience that the train's passengers might have of Mónica and her friends: decontextualized images, an

atemporal patch on a historically flattened pastiche. Gaviria's films, though, turn the lens of *pornomiseria* around on itself to express the poetry of the *comunas*,¹⁰ not by bypassing the specularity and atemporality of contemporary culture but by harnessing and reconfiguring the commercialized urban networks on whose outskirts they lie.

Gaviria's neorealist-inspired methodology seeks to reverse the conventional strategies of an objectifying medium, employing natural actors, carrying out painstaking research with them, allowing them to use their own language and handing them partial responsibility for the script.¹¹ The actors/characters are not marginal features of the city; the city is rather narrated as the backdrop to their lives. In *Rodrigo D.*, an establishing shot in Rodrigo's home shows the TV with an image of Rodrigo projected onto it as if he were on the air while he beats out a rhythm with his drumsticks—as the camera pans around we realize it is a reflection onto the blank screen. The idea that Rodrigo would be on television seems absurd; his is a life of “no future,” a million miles away from the glitzy world of showbiz. Yet the global flows of finance and information that it represents are not irrelevant to him: his ambition is to form a punk band, his own inflection of a transnational popular cultural form. Furthermore Rodrigo *is* on television (or rather on Gaviria's cinema screen), a figure that paradoxically acts as both an index to reality and an obstacle behind which the viewer can hide; yet it does, nevertheless, form a part of his cultural identity. As Geoffrey Kantaris has remarked, the punk ethic that shapes our understanding of him “represents both the outer limit *and inversion* of bourgeois consumerist culture” (section 3),¹² at once rebelling against every aspect of social, temporal or spatial control—“policía hijueputa” [bastard cop]; “no te salvarás porque te voy a matar” [you're not safe, I'm going to kill you]—and sharing common values of space/time reconversion with the dominant discourse of television. Martín-Barbero provides a useful illustration of the shards of postmodern culture out of which Rodrigo and those around him frame

their identities: “the televisual flow complements fragmentation, [...] the pulverization of time produced by the acceleration of the present, [...] transforming the extensive time of history into the intensive time of the instantaneous. [...] This same regime of acceleration systematically renders obsolete the great majority of objects that previously were made to last, to create memories, and that are now disposable” (*Mediaciones* 37). The difference between the spatio-temporal implosion of punk and that of mainstream postmodern culture is punk's violent rebellion against consumerist superficiality.

Gaviria's cuts from one scene to the next in *Rodrigo D.* do not always convey the chronological progression that we might expect in conventional cinematic narrative; his characters inhabit a time outside of Bhabha's performative history. Rodrigo is alienated not only from the linearity of pedagogical “national time” but also from contemporary mainstream narratives. As Gaviria suggests, Rodrigo exists in the eternal “useless time of the street kids who have no place in this world” (“Víctor Gaviria”) but he also inhabits, and strives to carve out a space within, commercial televisual time. Paradoxically, this pulverized time and “disposable” space that casts the likes of Rodrigo into invisibility is the same ethereal matter out of which he reconstructs his own identity. As Robert Stam has pointed out in his essay “Hybridity and the Aesthetics of Garbage,” such creative reconversion of detritus recalls, in a very different socio-cultural context, the strategies of Afro-diasporic artists “whose history has been destroyed and misrepresented, [...] dispersed and diasporized rather than lovingly memorialized, [... who] have been obliged to recreate history out of scraps and remnants and debris.” As Rodrigo walks up a slope with the Medellín cityscape behind him, he follows the path of a railing that severs him both physically and symbolically from the city's modernity; a cut to an extreme long-shot of the protagonist frames him passing underneath a huge publicity hoarding. The Spanish for billboard is “valla publicitaria,” but “valla”

also means “fence”—like the screen, it doubles up as a site of both obstruction and access to information; the information conferred is negotiated, after Baudrillard’s quotation above, “not [via] the referent of use value or utility, but [via] desire”—the desire created by consumerism.

Rodrigo D. ends with its anti-hero converted into a dehumanized physicality, a poetic being reduced to material decay: the last we see of him is an unrecognisable body shooting through a still frame as he throws himself out of a window, no longer able to bear the senselessness of his life. As he is left to rot, unmourned amongst the garbage, all of Gaviria’s hard work seems undone; yet his association with detritus is not necessarily cause for despair. Rodrigo is denied a funeral, a purging rationalisation of his death that would, perhaps, have served as a mythical index to a better place (Heaven), at least partially justifying his emptied-out existence. When his friend Jhoncito dies he *does* have a funeral, yet the music chosen to mourn him by, Pink Floyd’s *Wish You Were Here* (1975), serves only to alienate the possibility of escape even through death. A claustrophobic expression of disillusionment whose title suggests the empty promise of a holiday advertisement, the song challenges the listener “so you think you can tell Heaven from Hell, blue skies from pain?” running Utopian images into their baleful opposites and inverting the desire created by the slogan into circular despair: “We’re just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year / Running over the same old ground. What have you found? / The same old fears.” The “outside” implied by the funeral is indistinguishable from the living hell of the *comunas*; the commercialized society that has imbued him with the unrealizable desire for a better life brings down the tantalizing *valla* between bourgeois consumer and “lowlife.” The pervasive “third violence” of Medellín’s streets scuppers the cathartic temporal break of the funeral. Gaviria’s characters cannot find redemption within exclusionary “pedagogical” history, and the hypermodernity on whose margins they live slings their disillusioned

bodies onto the garbage heap of consumption; both fields of meaning provide them with potential but unattainable escapes from the dead-end times and spaces that nominally frame their lives. But by gathering together the fragments of historical detritus that they leave behind, people like Rodrigo seek to claim some sense of identity, a comfort from the “same old fears” that continue to haunt them.

Writing on the contrasting use of the “image of the real” in television journalism and in documentary filmmaking, Gaviria problematizes the immediacy of the image claimed by television which is, after all, “the result of a complex technical transformation” (“Del documental” 88). An image alone cannot produce a completed sign: the humanity of the documentary resides in “uniting image and sound in order to create characters with temporal depth” (“Del documental” 88), an audiovisual historicity apparently denied by the festering space/time compression of the garbage heap which is, writes Stam, “‘heterochronic’; it concentrates time in a circumscribed space” (8).¹³ Just as Stam’s garbage “is society’s id [that] steams and smells below the threshold of ideological rationalization,” the “dumping ground for transnational capitalism” (8), the inhabitants of Medellín’s shanty-towns are the forgotten leftovers of a neoliberal “growth” model that concentrates wealth increasingly in the hands of an economic elite, resulting in intensified rural conflict and an endless swelling of the slums such as the one Rodrigo inhabits. Yet if television’s “imagen real” aims to leave him on the rubbish tip, being momentarily fascinated with him before moving onto the next spectacle, Gaviria’s valorization of his image seeks to re-inflate his perceived semi-presence, converting the sensationalist two-dimensional half-truths of *pornomiseria* into a poetic expression of Rodrigo’s life, deepening understanding of him on both a national and an international level. By making him visible, Gaviria turns the apparatus of the audiovisual media against a mainstream society propelled by the value of financial transactions, exposing the putrefying foundations on which it is

built. The sterile conventionality of bourgeois existence is juxtaposed with the cultural vitality of those who, cast to the bottom of society's heap, reconstruct new identities with humanity, ingenuity and poetry out of the scraps of history that are left to them, renegotiating their old hegemonic pretensions and revaluing them on personal terms. Jesús Martín-Barbero quotes Walter Benjamin who writes of the need to "unleash the past that is tied down by the pseudo-continuity of history, and from it build a future" based on a conception of "tradition as a heritage, but not one that can be accumulated or converted into patrimony, but one that is radically ambiguous and permanently appropriated, reinterpreted and re-interpretable" (Martín-Barbero, "El futuro," section 3). In their renegotiation of time, space and history, the protagonists of Gaviria's film take a step toward writing such a future.

Conclusion: Illusory Dimensions

In "El futuro que habita la memoria" (section 3), Martín-Barbero proposes the "displacing of the 'old' museum and its relocation in the field of the cultural industry," drawing up a middle-ground between a nostalgic, conservative national culture and Baudrillard's museum as a "simulation machine." The audiovisual museum, he suggests, will be characterized by a "resistance to the assumed superiority of some cultures over others," encompassing the voices of alterity characterized by what the authoritative voice of history might define as temporal non-sequiturs and geographical abandonment. It would perhaps be hyperbolic to suggest that Gaviria's poetic neorealist aesthetic in *Rodrigo D* performs a fundamental questioning of dominant social narratives and hierarchies,¹⁴ but we can at least say that the film, by depicting a time outside historical "progress," might find a place in such an audiovisual museum. This is a spaceless place that might provide the "memory that has gone missing in this country of displaced and disappeared people, of thousands of bodies waiting to be buried:

the museum as an experience of collective mourning, without which this country will never be at peace" (Martín-Barbero, "El futuro," section 3). Rodrigo is denied a funeral; violence for him cannot be historicized and cast into the collective (or individual) memory to provide catharsis for grief, as it is for the repressed urban protagonists of *Pisingaña*. Neither is violence, as it is in *Pura sangre*, a conduit for the political power of capitalism: consumer culture has barely reached the *comunas*. Violence, here, is the very fabric out of which Rodrigo's present is woven. Yet Gaviria speaks of the "*joie-de-vivre* of the popular quarters [...] far from the consumerism, the self-absorbed indifference of the middle classes"¹⁵: the possibility to convert their lives into narrative not only makes them human but differentiates them from the impersonal transactions that define the postmodern bourgeoisie. Perhaps through its grammar of concentrated present-moments and historical collage, Gaviria's film can act as a funeral, if not by claiming to preserve memories for a historically linear posterity, then through the heterochronic compression of celluloid.

Writing on the place of national and local Latin American communities within a global marketplace, Néstor García Canclini proposes that their "identity and history [...] fit in the cultural industries even with their need for high financial yield" (256). By making minority discourses visible to an international public, he argues, marketable cinema can bring about a "*mestización* of consumption [which] engenders difference and diverse forms of local rootedness:" beyond the traditional notions of territorial nationalism or local identification, deterritorialized "postnational cultures" become reterritorialized around the logic of transnational capitalism, a movement which can have a beneficial effect: "identity... will not be only a ritualized narration, the monotonous repetition of outmoded principles. Identity, as a narrative we constantly reconstruct with others, is also a co-production" (García Canclini 257). This narrative of identity is in *Rodrigo D*. a co-production not only amongst cultural communities, but also be-

tween the less tangible quantities of audiovisual realities. I have outlined the problem of historicity met by characters in the other films I have discussed: in the search for an originary moment they come up against only layers of truths, half-truths and untruths, compromised by the repressive codes of exclusionary societies (*Pisingaña*) or the illusory desires bartered by the commercially driven logic of the media (*Pura sangre*). Yet this is a problem that the children of the *comunas* in Gaviria's films meet only with contempt. The director tells of the subversive games the children play in the streets, recounting the story that inspired a similar scene in *Vendedora*: one boy, Chocolatina, stole a bag from a car from a man watching a mariachi show; the man caught him and shot at him with his pistol. As Chocolatina ran away, his friend Elkin knocked the gun out of his hand with a broom handle, aiming at him

with the handle, as if it were a gun. As the boys left the scene the man recovered his gun and continued to fire at them, but Chocolatina and Elkin did not flee: "instead they staggered off like drunkards, the indifferent meanderings of children who play at only pretending to exist" (Gaviria, "Víctor Gaviria"). Like the inhabitants of Baudrillard's hyperreality they collapsed truth and fiction into a virtual present, but unlike the distanced spectator they run a real risk of being killed, and they do not care. Here, perhaps, they are taking on cinema on its own terms, for by skating on the surface between reality and fiction they are challenging the image-based "virtualization" to which they are subjected. Their "useless time" has become a part of history and, fittingly, it is the part that dissolves the most fundamental of rationalist oppositions: that which separates life from death.

Notes:

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² On the establishment, regulations and decline of FOCINE, see FOCINE ("Creación"); King (207-215); Lenti ("Colombia").

³ For a variety of perspectives on FOCINE from radical left filmmakers, see "El Nuevo Cine Colombiano."

⁴ The years given refer to release dates, according to the reference volume *Largometrajes colombianos en cine y video, 1915-2004*. Bogotá: Fundación Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano, 2005.

⁵ All translations into English are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ It is important to differentiate between the violence that serves as the contemporary backdrop to *Pisingaña* and other forms and modes of violence that have characterized Colombian society since the mid-twentieth century. Colombia's *violentólogos* have tended to classify the various "violences" between the "first Violence" (commonly known in Colombia simply as *La Violencia*) that emerged out of *El Bogotazo*—the assassination of the left-populist political leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948; the "second violence" of the rural struggle between guerrilla, state and paramilitary forces from the 1960s, dealt with in *Pisingaña*; and the urban "third violence" caused by the poverty and marginalization of internal refugees to the big cities and linked to the activities of drug cartels, of

which Victor Gaviria's *La vendedora de rosas* is symptomatic. For a discussion of this typology of violences, in relation specifically to the representation of the "third violence" in Colombian fiction films, see Kantaris ("El cine urbano").

⁷ On the association between violence and capitalism in *Pura sangre*, see also Kantaris ("El cine urbano").

⁸ Quoted by Martín-Barbero ("El futuro," section 1). Emphasis in original.

⁹ See, for instance, Julio Luzardo's comments on Gaviria's subsequent film *La vendedora de rosas* (1998) (Luzardo, "La vendedora de rosas, largometraje colombiano ¿pornomiseria?" *Enrodaje*, <http://enrodaje.tripod.com/1cine.htm>, quoted in Jáuregui and Suárez ("Profilaxis," 373). The filmmaker Carlos Mayolo hinted at a similar reading (Jaimes, "Antes que el orden").

¹⁰ The term used more generally for shanty-towns in Colombian Spanish is *invasiones*—whole residential districts on city outskirts housing internally displaced refugees from both the "first" and the "second" violences discussed above. These spaces are thus linguistically cast apart from the city, posing them as an alien menace encroaching on metropolitan normality.

¹¹ The title of Gaviria's film is a homage to Vittorio de Sica's Italian neo-realist classic *Umberto D.* (1952).

¹² Emphasis in original.

¹³ Stam borrows the concept of heterochronicity from Foucault.

¹⁴ Indeed, a longer study might address the methodological and textual power relations at work between Gaviria-as-filmmaker and Rodrigo-as-subject—a key issue in relation to both neorealist cinema and ethnographic documentary.

¹⁵ Speaking in a public forum, Museo de Antioquia, Medellín, 28 June 2001.

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